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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 006768

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ARCHONS MEET WITH FM GUL

REF: A. ANKARA 6628

[B](#). ANKARA 895

[C](#). ISTANBUL 1753

[D](#). ANKARA 6229

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Eric S. Edelman; reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Representatives of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a U.S.-based group of Greek Orthodox laymen, met with FM Gul December 2 during a religious pilgrimage to Turkey. The Archons urged Gul to take action to reverse the process of State expropriation of Greek Orthodox properties. They averred that Turkey's Greek Orthodox community is in crisis, and the continued survival of the Patriarchate in Istanbul is in doubt. Turkey's Greek Orthodox community has dwindled to approximately 2,000, and there is no available successor to replace Patriarch Bartholomew I. They called on Gul to reach agreement with the Patriarchate on the re-opening of the Halki Seminary, and to help prevent a non-profit Greek Orthodox hospital from closing due to exorbitant back taxes. Gul maintained that the GOT is committed to religious freedom, and is working to resolve problems through legal reform. Gul attempted to minimize the problems facing the Patriarchate. He said there are also restrictions against the practice of Islam in Turkey, including the ban on headscarves at universities, and there is no discrimination against non-Muslims. The Ambassador hosted a reception for the full 80-member Archon delegation at his residence, and the Archons held a banquet in the Ambassador's honor. The GOT issued a written directive advising public officials not to attend the events, on the grounds that the GOT does not recognize the ecumenical status of the Patriarchate. End Summary.

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"Ecumenical" Title Sparks Controversy  
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[1](#)2. (C) After traveling to Istanbul as part of a pilgrimage involving the transfer of the relics of two saints from the Vatican to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Archons came to Ankara December 2. The Ambassador held a reception for the 80-member delegation at his residence, and the Archons held a banquet in the Ambassador's honor at the Hilton. The Archons' visit drew sharp controversy after Turkish MPs and GOT leaders raised objections related to the group's formal title, "The Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate" (reftel A). Turkey does not recognize the ecumenical status of the Patriarchate. The GOT issued a circular directing public officials not to attend the reception or banquet. The Archon leadership declined GOT offers of meetings with Yusuf Beyazit, head of the General Directorate of Foundations; Ali Bardakoglu, chairman of the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet); and Ertugrul Apakan, MFA Deputy U/S. The Ambassador did attend the meetings, and raised issues relating to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Anthony Limberakis, head of the Archon delegation, told us the Archons (who had requested a meeting with PM Erdogan) wanted to meet with higher-level officials, and were upset about the GOT reaction to their visit. The Archons did accept a last-minute appointment with FM Gul.

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Archons: "Flame is Flickering"  
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[1](#)3. (U) Limberakis told Gul he and the other Archons were "jubilant" after meeting in February with Education Minister Celik, Interior Minister Aksu, and State Minister Aydin (reftel B). They left Turkey confident the GOT was committed to improving relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Today, however, the Greek Orthodox community is as discouraged as it has ever been. There has been no progress on the re-opening of the Patriarchate's Halki seminary, and the State continues the process of expropriating Greek Orthodox properties. Letters from the Patriarchate to PM Erdogan have gone unanswered. Limberakis called this an "emergency." The Greek Orthodox population in Turkey has dwindled to fewer than 2,000 people (Note: This is consistent with some estimates we have seen. End Note). The survival of the Patriarchate is at stake -- "the flame is flickering." Limberakis said the GOT should recognize the Patriarchate as

a "treasure of Turkey," a centuries-old institution providing spiritual leadership to tens of millions of Orthodox faithful worldwide. He urged Gul to take action to enable the Patriarchate to survive, and thrive, in Turkey.

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Gul Counsels Patience  
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14. (U) Gul, somewhat derisively, maintained that the problems faced by the Patriarchate are relatively minor. He said Turkey has a history of religious tolerance. The majority Muslim population also has concerns; for example, pious Muslim women are not allowed to wear Islamic headscarves on university campuses. Gul insisted the State does not discriminate against non-Muslims. The GOT is gradually working to solve problems relating to religious freedom. Gul cited recent reforms aimed at loosening restrictions on non-Muslims, such as a law allowing non-Muslim foundations to acquire property, and a regulation designed to facilitate board elections for minority religious foundations. He acknowledged that these reforms were insufficient, but urged the Archons to be patient and trust in the GOT's good will. Limberakis averred that time is running out for the Patriarchate and the community it serves. Turkish law requires that the Patriarch be a Turkish citizen, but there is no qualified successor in the wings to replace Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The Ambassador added that the USG, including members of Congress, is concerned that the center of Orthodoxy will move to Mt. Athos or Moscow, which would be a great loss for Turkey.

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Hospital Faces Closure...  
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15. (U) Limberakis said the Greek Orthodox are worried about efforts by tax authorities to charge Balikli Hospital, a non-profit Greek Orthodox facility in Istanbul, five years of back taxes at the exorbitantly high rate of 40 percent (reftel C). Limberakis, a physician, said Balikli treats 30,000-40,000 Turkish patients a year. It contains one of only two drug and rehabilitation centers in Turkey. Hospital officials will have to close the facility if they are forced to pay. Ahmet Davutoglu, Prime Ministry chief foreign policy advisor, said institutions such as Balikli were tax exempt until 1999. However, under current laws the state may tax the commercial operations of non-profit foundations. In addition to its charitable activities, the hospital also engages in commercial activities. He claimed the law is being applied to all kinds of institutions across the board -- the Greek Orthodox are not being singled out.

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...While Seminary Remains Shut  
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16. (U) Limberakis noted that the Patriarchate's Halki Seminary has been closed since 1971, when the State nationalized all private institutions of higher learning. Without the seminary, the Patriarchate is unable to train new clergy. The Ambassador recalled that he had recently met with Minister Celik to discuss options for reopening Halki (reftel D). Celik had said there were no GOT-Patriarchate discussions on Halki and no new developments. The Ambassador asked whether the GOT has since made any progress. Gul said the GOT wants to find a solution for Halki, but the issue has become entangled in political controversy, making it more difficult to resolve.

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Comment  
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17. (C) Gul had obviously not been briefed on the issues, and was defensive at various points. Turks almost universally believe their country has an impeccable record of tolerance toward minority religions. They have been taught that, while Europe was wracked by religious conflict, the Ottoman Empire allowed non-Muslim communities to run some of their own affairs (though they were treated as second-class subjects), and that Jews migrated to Istanbul after being expelled from Spain in 1492. There is little awareness of how the concept of religious freedom has evolved in the West since that period.

18. (C) Turkish sensitivity to the ecumenical status of the Patriarchate is partly rooted in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. The Turkish State maintains that the treaty obligates Turkey to accept the Patriarchate's continued presence in Istanbul, but does not require Turkey to recognize its ecumenical status. Turkey officially regards the Patriarch as the leader of only the Greek Orthodox community residing in Turkey. Turkish politicians and pundits often allege that use of the title "ecumenical" is part of a plot to turn the Patriarchate into an "Orthodox Vatican" independent from Turkey. Some also argue that since the Turkish Republic

abolished the Caliphate, it cannot allow a non-Muslim leader to have ecumenical status. Sensitivities are also exacerbated by historic conflict between the Greeks and Turks. When we discuss the Patriarchate with GOT officials, they often make reference to the fact that Greeks in Istanbul cheered invading Greek soldiers after the First World War, or that the Patriarch in 1919 sent telegrams to Paris urging the Allies to return "Constantinople" to Greece.

EDELMAN